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Washington Report
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PASSOVER THOUGHTS ON SOVIET JEWRY

As I write this column, my wife and I are eagerly anticipating spending part of the Passover holiday united with our children and our parents in Los Angeles. We are especially proud that our son Michael, who just turned seven, will be able to participate fully at each Seder.

The blessings we take for granted -- Jewish day schools, temples and synagogues of every description, freedom of travel -- all of these are alien to Soviet Jews. All of their expressions of commitment to the Jewish people and to our religion are made with great difficulty and at great risk.

Recent news from the Soviet Union has been very discouraging. During the first three months of last year, nearly 9,000 Soviet Jews were permitted to emigrate. During the same period this year, the figure is a mere 3,506 -- a decline of over 60%. The 1980 figures were less than half those shown for 1979. Clearly, the Soviets have sharply curtailed the immigration program in which so many Jews placed their hopes.

Why have the Soviets restricted Jewish immigration so sharply? Some feel that it is in response to the anti-Soviet posture of the Reagan Administration. I doubt that this is an important factor.

People who have traveled in the Soviet Union very recently, report that there is an open and large-scale campaign to win greater allegiance of Jews to the Soviet system. Incredibly, the same propaganda machine which turned out anti-Semitic material a year ago is now praising Jewish contributions to Soviet Life.

On the neighborhood, factory and university levels, prominent
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and successful Jews who are also loyal Communists are being singled out for conspicuous praise and advancement. Refuseniks, previously punished for having sought permission to leave, are now told that "all will be forgiven" if they simply withdraw their applications for exit visas.

I suspect that the Soviets have become frightened that Jewish emigration may result in a "brain drain" which could affect their achievements, especially in science and technology.

I do not believe that the new Soviet tactics will alter the untenable position in which Jews find themselves in the Soviet Union. The general population, with few exceptions, is basically anti-Semitic. The fundamental rules of the Soviet state are inimical to the fulfillment of Jewish values -- whether they be Zionist, religious or cultural. The pressure for freedom to emigrate will grow not diminish.

Our role in the United States is to remain steadfastly committed to the right of Soviet Jews to live in the nation of their choosing. All our dealings with the Russians must be linked to this most basic human rights issue.

To all my longtime friends, constituents and supporters, my best wishes for a Happy and Healthy Passover. May we all see a renewal of the value of freedom this festival commemorates -- both in the Soviet Union and around the world.

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